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North Korea's Political Prison Camp, *Kwan-li-so* No. 25, Update 3

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THE COMMITTEE FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORTH KOREA
북한인권위원회

NORTH KOREA'S POLITICAL PRISON CAMP, KWAN-LI-SO NO. 25, UPDATE 3



Location

Susŏng-dong, Ch'ŏngjin-si, Hambuk (Susŏng neighborhood, Ch'ŏngjin City, North Hamgyŏng Province)

CenterPoint Coordinates

41.834384, 129.725280

Date of Report

September 30, 2021

Date of Imagery Used in This Report

May 11, 2021

Size of Facility

0.98 square kilometers (0.38 square miles)
1,810 meters by 1,240 meters
(1,979 yards by 1,356 yards)

Background

The United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea (UN COI) determined that "crimes against humanity have been committed in North Korea, pursuant to policies established at the highest level of the State." Many of these crimes against humanity take place against persons detained in political and other prisons—persons who the Commission determined are among the "primary targets of a systematic and widespread attack" by the North Korean regime, including murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortions and other sexual violence, persecution on political grounds, and the enforced disappearance of persons.

According to the UN COI, "The unspeakable atrocities that are being committed against inmates of the *kwan-li-so* political prison camps resemble the horrors of camps that totalitarian States established during the twentieth century."

Based on research conducted by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), seven trends have defined the human rights situation under the Kim Jong-un regime:

1. an intensive crackdown on attempted defections
2. a restructuring of the political prison camp system, with some facilities closer to the border with China being shut down, while inland facilities have been expanded, and construction of internal high-security compounds within the prisons
3. the sustained, if not increased, economic importance of the political prison camps

4. the disproportionate oppression of women by North Korean officials; women have assumed primary responsibility for the survival of their families and thus represent the majority of those arrested for perceived wrongdoing at the "jangmadang" markets, or for "illegally" crossing the border
5. an aggressive purge of senior officials, aimed to consolidate the leader's grip on power
6. targeting of North Korean escapees, and
7. increased focus on eliminating "reactionary" thoughts.

While commercially available satellite imagery as used in this report allows the world to see guard positions and often people, for example in political prison camps, the full extent of Kim Jong-un's human rights violations in the camps remains uncovered. Nevertheless, the continued monitoring of such camps provides a way to

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shed some light on the abuses endured by North Korea's most vulnerable—its political prisoners who are oppressed through unlawful arrest, detention, torture, inhospitable prison conditions, sexual violence, and public and private executions.

Analysis

Executive Summary

This report is part of a comprehensive long-term project undertaken by HRNK to use satellite imagery and former detainee interviews to shed light on human suffering in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, more commonly known as North Korea) by monitoring activity at political prison facilities throughout the nation.¹ This report provides an abbreviated update to our previous reports

on a long-term political prison commonly identified by former prisoners and researchers as Kwan-li-so No. 25² by providing details of significant activity observed during 2016–2021.³

For this report HRNK analyzed 6 high-resolution commercial pan-sharpened multispectral and panchromatic satellite images of *Kwan-li-so* No. 25, and its immediate environs.⁴

- » Security perimeters (internal and external), entrance and guard positions
- » Main prison
- » Headquarters, administration, barracks, and support facilities
- » Activity in the immediate environs of the facility
- » Small walled compounds

Based upon analysis of these features *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 remains an operational prison established sometime about 1968. That it is mature and well maintained by North Korean standards is indicated by activity and general good maintenance in and immediately surrounding the prison.

Satellite imagery coverage of the facility and interviewee testimony indicates that the prison's economic activity is a combination of agricultural production and light industry manufacturing (i.e., bicycles, wood products and other products) using forced labor.⁵

Despite extensive satellite imagery coverage of the prison, HRNK is presently unable to confirm or deny escapee and open-source reports that the prison has a prisoner population of approx-

imately 5,000 people. With that said, the composition and physical size of the prison suggests that it could accommodate somewhere between 2,500 and 5,000 prisoners. Recent reports of a 41,000 prison population are grossly exaggerated.⁶

As with the analytical caution presented in previous HRNK reports (such as North Korea's Chŭngsan No. 11 Detention Facility) it is important to reiterate that North Korean officials, especially those within the Korean People's Army and the internal security organizations, clearly understand the importance of implementing camouflage, concealment, and deception (CCD) procedures to mask their operations and intentions.⁷ It would not be unreasonable to assume that they have to some degree done so here.

Figure 1

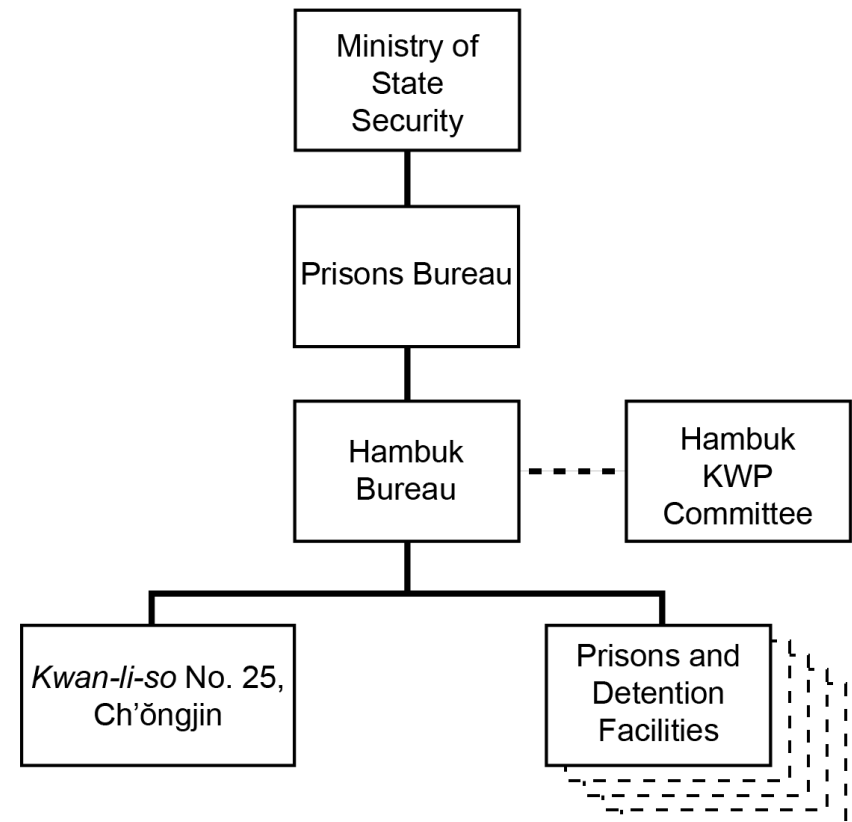
Overview of *Kwan-li-so* No. 25.

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Location and Subordination

Kwan-li-so No. 25 (41.834384, 129.725280) is located outside the town of Susŏng-dong (수성동, 41.827222, 129.736111), Ch'ŏngjin-si (청진, Ch'ŏngjin City, 41.887222, 129.831944), Hambuk (함북, North Hamgyŏng Province)—approximately 7.5 kilometers northwest of Ch'ŏngjin and 458 kilometers northeast of the capital city of P'yŏngyang. More specifically, it is located on the south bank of the Solgol-ch'ŏn (i.e., Solgol stream) across from the village of Susŏng-dong—to which one foot and two road bridges connect it. The prison consists of a moderately-sized walled compound, and headquarters, support, and guard housing areas.⁸

This *kwan-li-so* is reported to be subordinate to the Prisons Bureau of the Ministry of State Security (MSS).⁹ Specifically, it would be under the control of the ministry's Hambuk Bureau. However, it cannot be ruled out that it is subordinate to the ministry's Ch'ŏngjin-si Bureau. The MSS itself reports to the State Affairs Commission chaired by Kim Jong-un.¹⁰ Since 2018, Colonel General Jong Gyong-taek has been reported to be the Minister of State Security.



Ministry of State Security, Hambuk Prison Bureau (Simplified)

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In December 2018, the U.S. Department of the Treasury included Colonel General Jong Gyong-taek on its "Specially Designated Nationals List Update" as head of the MSS and a person of interest for illegal activities [including human rights violations].¹¹ Two years later, in May 2020, the United States updated its designation of the MSS Prisons Bureau (also known as Farm Bureau and Farm Guidance Bureau). Then, in March 2021, the European Union designated Colonel General Jong for human rights violations stating:

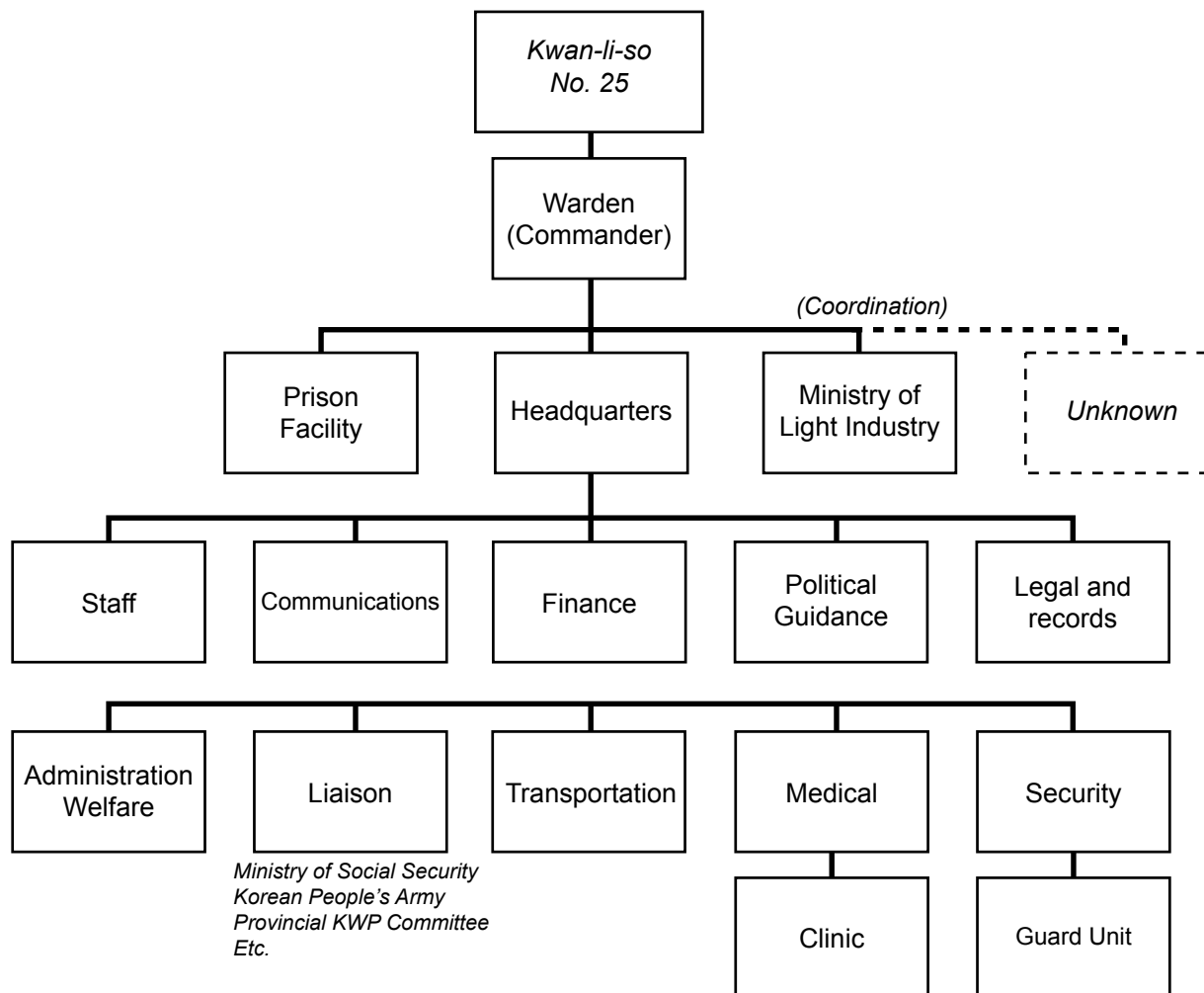
As Head of the Ministry of State Security, Jong Kyo-ng-thaek [Jong Gyong-taek] is responsible for serious human rights violations in the DPRK, in particular torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and killings, enforced disappearance of persons, and arbitrary arrests or detentions, as well as widespread forced labour and sexual violence against women.¹²

Organization

What little publicly-available information and known North Korean organizational patterns indicate is that *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 is likely to be organized along a somewhat standard pattern—probably similar, but enlarged, to that seen at *kyo-hwa-so* (long-term prison labor facility). Such an organization would likely consist of a headquarters staff, communications section, finance section, political guidance section, legal and records, administration and welfare section, liaison sec-

tion (Ministry of Social Security, Korean People's Army, Hambuk and Ch'ongjin-si Korea Workers' Party Committees, etc.), transportation section, safety/medical section, and a security section (a guard unit). While it is likely that there is some level of coordination with the Ministry of Light Industry, what coordination there is between *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 and other organizations is unknown.

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Kwan-li-so No. 25, Ch'öngjin (Provisional)

Little is known concerning the forced labor activities imposed upon the prisoners at *Kwan-li-so* No. 25. What we do know from several interviews is that at different times, they have reportedly been engaged in agricultural production, manufacturing of furniture, manufacturing of bicycles, and more.

There are at least three military garrisons (likely for both active and paramilitary reserve forces) and eleven air defense artillery sites observed within five kilometers of the prison. While these air defense sites are well positioned to provide protection to *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 they, however, are more likely components of the integrated air defense of Ch'öngjin-si¹³. The closest air facility to *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 is the Korean People's Air Force's Süngam-ni Airbase, located approximately 18 kilometers to the south-southwest and a small helicopter/UAV airstrip approximately 1 kilometer northwest. Süngam-ni is a training base, and due to its mission, organization, and location, almost certainly pro-

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vides no support to *Kwan-li-so* No. 25. Likewise, the helicopter/UAV airstrip almost certainly provide no support to *Kwan-li-so* No. 25.

While the prison is likely connected to the regional telephone network, it is likely via buried service as no evidence of overhead service was identified in satellite imagery. The prison is connected to the regional electric power grid via overhead high-voltage power transmission cables that run from the prison to the substation approximately 1 kilometer to the southeast. The nearest rail facility is the rail station at Susöng-dong, 800 meters to the east of the prison.

Development

Readers are encouraged to download and review the development of *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 between 2003 and 2016 in our three previous reports on the prison.¹⁴ This current report will solely focus upon major changes that have occurred between 2016 and 2021.

Imagery Analysis

For this report HRNK analyzed 6 high-resolution commercial pan-sharpened multispectral and panchromatic satellite images of *Kwan-li-so* No. 25, and its immediate environs focusing upon examination of the following physical features:

- » Security perimeters (internal and external), entrance and guard positions
- » Main prison
- » Headquarters, administration, barracks, and support facilities
- » Activity in the immediate environs of the facility

Walled compounds

This analysis shows that the prison and associated agricultural and light industries were active throughout the period from 2016 to 2021. This is indicated by constant maintenance of the agricultural fields and orchards, the planting and harvesting of different crops over the years, move-

ment of vehicles and supplies at the light industry facilities, and people observed throughout the facility. Most changes observed to the physical infrastructure of *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 were minor in nature and typical of what had previously been observed at the prison. Among these changes were rearrangement, razing, or construction of entrances (there are 9 internal and external entrances) and guard positions (there are 41); small structures being updated, razed, or built; minor changes in roads/trail; etc.¹⁵ One exception of interest to this was the construction of a small walled facility in the southwest corner of the facility between February 2018 and August 2018.

Located within the extreme southwest corner of *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 is a small 690 square meter (823 square yard) compound with a high security wall. Inside the compound is a 160 square meter (190 square yard) single-story building. Approximately 100 meters to the east is a 115 square meter (138 square yard) single-story building.

Both structures were constructed during 2010. The walled compound is relatively isolated within the prison. It is overlooked by 12 guard positions and its size and construction are not consistent with North Korean practices for the storage of heavy equipment or munitions. Therefore, the most reasonable explanation is that it is a high-security prison compound for high-value political prisoners. The second building is likely for guard or support personnel as it is not walled. These buildings have not changed since their construction and remain active.

Figure 2



Secure compound in southeast corner of *Kwan-li-so* No. 25.

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Sometime between February and August 2018, a second walled compound was constructed 50 meters to the east of the high-security prison compound. This 198 square meter (237 square yard) compound is surrounded by a security wall and contains a 48 square meter (57 square yard) building. The presence of an opening in the security wall suggests that it is not a second high-security prison. Although the purpose of this new compound is unknown, its proximity to the existing high-security prison in the isolated southeast corner of the prison and the fact that it is overlooked by the same 12 guard positions indicates a close association.

Assessment

Taken in context with previous analysis, the analysis of recent high-resolution satellite imagery of *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 and its environs collected between 2016 and 2021 indicates that:

- » *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 remains an operational prison fa-

cility that has witnessed a number of minor changes between 2016 and 2021

- » It remains, by DPRK standards, a mature and well-maintained prison facility
- » Except for the construction of a second secure facility in the southwest corner of the facility there have been no significant changes to the physical size, including prisoner housing, of the facility during the past five years
- » Perimeter walls, fences, and gates are well maintained and in good repair
- » Guard positions are well positioned to provide overlapping fields-of-view of the prison and are well maintained and in good repair
- » Administrative, barracks, housing, cultural welfare, support buildings, and grounds are well maintained and in good repair
- » The grounds and buildings (i.e., wood products factory, light industry area, and prisoner housing) of the central compound

appear to be moderately well maintained and in a moderate state of repair

- » The wood products and light industrial factories appear to be operating, as is evidenced by the presence of vehicles and supplies
- » All agricultural fields are well defined, maintained, and irrigated. The fields to the north of the prison appear to have two different crops under cultivation
- » Prisoner population has likely remained relatively constant or increased slightly and is employed to both maintain the agricultural fields, orchards, and livestock, and to work in the prison's wood products and light industrial factories

There is likely both an important economic and social relationship between *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 and the adjacent villages of Susŏng-dong and Songgong-ni.

As noted above, and despite extensive satellite imagery coverage

of the prison, HRNK is presently unable to confirm or deny escapee and open-source reports that *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 has a prisoner population of approximately 5,000 inmates. The composition and physical size of the prison suggests, however, that it could accommodate somewhere between 2,500 and 5,000 prisoners. HRNK anticipates that we will be able to develop accurate estimates of this population in the future, when satellite imagery is correlated with future declassified information and interviews with additional former prisoners.

Recommendations

Continued background investigation and ongoing monitoring of *Kwan-li-so* No. 25 is recommended to identify all of its components, to provide a detailed accounting of its previous operations, and to develop an objective baseline understanding of their continuing activities, maintain an evidentiary catalog of physical changes at the facility, update its

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status, and develop evidence of prisoner population size.

HRNK calls upon the Kim regime to acknowledge the existence of its political prisons as the first step towards their dismantlement; immediately improve the nutritional status of prisoners, many of whom suffer from severe malnutrition; improve health and safety standards at worksites where prison labor is present; allow the ICRC immediate, full, and genuine access to this and all other detention facilities in North Korea; comply with the *Standard Minimum Rules for Treatment of Prisoners*; and provide access to Colonel General Jong Gyong-taek, his predecessors, and successors.

The Kim regime's practice of state-sponsored forced labor and egregious human rights violations, constituting crimes against humanity in both the *kwan-li-so* and *kyo-hwa-so*, must be highlighted by UN member states when issuing recommendations to North Korea.

Note

HRNK would like to extend a special note of thanks to Allen Anderson, Bobby Holt, and Ronald Bohmuller for their gracious support of HRNK's efforts to document North Korea's political prison system and the tragic conditions present within that system.

Gazetteer

Location	Latitude (N)	Longitude (E)
Ch'ŏngjin-si (청진시)	41.887222	129.831944
<i>Kwan-li-so</i> No. 25	41.834384	129.725280
Songgong-ni (송곡리)	41.843611	129.715833
Susŏng-dong (수성동)	41.827222	129.736111

Endnotes

1. Previous reports in the project can be found at, <https://www.hrnk.org/publications/hrnk-publications.php>.
2. Bermudez Jr., Joseph S. *et al. North Korea Camp No. 25 – Update 2* (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, November 29, 2016), https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/ASA_HRNK_Camp25_Update2.pdf; Bermudez Jr., Joseph S. *et al. North Korea Camp No. 25 – Update* (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, June 5, 2014), <https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Camp%2025%20Update%20Good.pdf>; and Bermudez Jr., Joseph S. *et al. "Satellite Imagery Shows Captives Inside Camp No. 25 in North Korea," HRNK Insider*, August 8, 2018, https://www.hrnkinsider.org/2018/08/satellite-imagery-shows-captives-inside_30.html.
3. Some interviewees and researchers have occasionally identified the facility as the "Political Prison Camp 25," "Camp 25," or the "Susŏng-dong *Kyo-hwa-so*" (re-education through labor camp).
4. The term "high resolution" in this report refers to digital satellite images with a ground sample distance (GSD) of less than 1 meter. The GSD is the distance between pixel centers when measured on the ground. Analog (film) satellite imagery is measured in ground resolution. Declassified KH-4B satellite imagery has a best ground resolution of approximately 1.8 meters and KH-9 of .6 to 1.2 meters.
5. *Interview of former prisoner by HRNK*, Seoul, April 23, 2019 (hereafter: *Interview i33*).
6. Mun Dong Hui, "The Number of Inmates in North Korean Political Prisons Have Increased by at Least 20,000 Since March 2020," (original article in Korean) *Daily NK*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/number-inmates-north-korean-political-prisons-increased-at-least-20000-since-march-2020/>.
7. Bermudez Jr., Joseph S., Greg Scarlatou, Amanda Mortwedt Oh, and Rosa Park, *North Korea's Chŭngsan No. 11 Detention Facility*, (Washington, D.C.: HRNK), December 21, 2020, https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Chŭngsan%20No_%2011%20Detention%20Facility%20Web.pdf; and Bermudez Jr., Joseph S., Greg Scarlatou, Amanda Mortwedt Oh, and Rosa Park, *North Korea's Long-term Prison-Labor Facility Kyo-hwa-so No. 12, Jŏngŏ-ri - Update 3*, (Washington, D.C.: HRNK), September 30, 2020, https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/KHSI2_FINALFINAL.pdf.
8. It is interesting to note that although the escapee descriptions of this facility's mission match that of other *kwan-li-so*, the physical characteristics observed in satellite imagery are more representative of the nation's *kyo-hwa-so*, or long-term, felony penitentiaries and prison camps. David Hawk, *The Hidden Gulag: Second Edition*, Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012, www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_HiddenGulag2_Web_5-18.pdf. Another source describes Camp No. 25 this way,
9. It is not structured as a village but is a fenced facility that looks like an ordinary prison camp [*kyo-hwa-so*] and is designed for collective living arrangements. The No. 25 [*kwan-li-so*] houses political prisoners only, while those who committed economic crimes are not allowed into the facility. Some inmates are released upon completion of their term as terms are fixed. Political criminals are detained alone without their families. ...North Korean defector XXX testified, "Military personnel are sent off to the Susong *kyo-hwa-so* [*Kwan-li-so* No. 25] if their alleged crimes are of a political nature. The Susong *kyo-hwa-so* [*Kwan-li-so* No. 25] is for those serving terms of 10 years or longer, but they can return to society once they complete these terms." It was also testified that the No. 25 *kwan-li-so* housed senior staff at the Provincial Party, the head of a local MPS office, and other high-ranking officials. North Korean defector XXX testified that the father of his friend used to perform the duty of turning over Korean War POWs to South Korea, but he was arrested while attempting to cross the border at the river in Namyang, Onsung County, North Hamgyong Province. He ended up at the No. 25 *kwan-li-so* in Chongjin.
10. Do Kyung-Ok *et al.*, *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2015* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2015), p. 122, available at http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub_04_01.jsp.
11. Also known as the "Farm Bureau" and "Farm Guidance Bureau." <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20200513>. The United Kingdom identifies "Bureau 7 of the MSS" [likely the Prisons Bureau] as part of its *Global Human Rights* sanctions regime. *UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Letter to HRNK*, dated July 22, 2021.
12. According to researcher Fyodor Tertitskiy the MSS is under the *de facto* control of the Korean Workers' Party's (KWP) Organization and Guidance Department (OGD). Tertitskiy also states that the MSS became the Ministry for Protection of the State (국가보위성, Guk-ga-bo-wi-sung) in 2016 under Kim Jong-un. Fyodor Tertitskiy, "How the North is Run: The Secret Police," *NK News*, July 24, 2018, <https://www.nknews.org/pro/how-the-north-is-run-the-secret-police-2/>.
13. Jong Gyong-taek is sometimes identified as Jong Kyong Thaek, Jong Kyong-thaek, or 정경택. According to Yonhap, Jong was demoted to the rank of colonel general (three stars) in September 2020. N. Korea's spy chief demoted to colonel general," Yonhap, September 30, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200930004900320>.
14. "Treasury Sanctions North Korean Officials and Entities in Response to Regime's Serious Human Rights Abuses and Censorship," December 10, 2018, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm568>.

15. U.S. Department of the Treasury, "North Korea Administrative Designations Update," May 13, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20200513>.
16. "Legislation," Official Journal of the European Union 64, no. L 99 I (March 22, 2021): 7, 31, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2021:099I:FULL&from=EN>.
17. No surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites are observed within this area.
18. Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Andy Dinville, and Mike Eley. *North Korea's Camp No. 25 Update-2*, (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, November 29, 2016), available at https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/ASA_HRNK_Camp25_Update2.pdf; Bermudez Jr., Joseph S. *North Korea's Camp No. 25 Update*, (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, June 5, 2014), available at http://hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Camp25_201302_Updated_LQ.pdf; Bermudez Jr., Joseph S. and Farfour, Micah. *North Korea's Camp No. 25*, (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, February 25, 2013), available at http://hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Camp25_201302_Updated_LQ.pdf.
19. Given the small size of many of the guard positions and the limits of image resolution these numbers should be viewed as approximate. Since entrances, both internal and external, likely have guards, these can also be counted as "guard positions." Doing so would increase the number of "guard positions" to 50—an exceptional number for such a small facility.



THE COMMITTEE FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORTH KOREA
북한인권위원회

HRNK is the leading U.S.-based bipartisan, non-governmental organization in the field of North Korean human rights research and advocacy, tasked to focus international attention on human rights abuses in that country. It is HRNK's mission to persistently remind policy makers, opinion leaders, and the general public in the free world and beyond that more than 20 million North Koreans need our attention.

Since its establishment in 2001, HRNK has played an important intellectual leadership role on North Korean human rights issues by publishing over 50 major reports (available at <https://hrnk.org/publications/hrnk-publications.php>). HRNK became the first organization to propose that the human rights situation in North Korea be addressed by the UN Security Council. HRNK was directly, actively, and effectively involved in all stages of the process supporting the work of the UN Commission of Inquiry. HRNK has been invited numerous times to provide expert testimony before the U.S. Congress. In April 2018, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) granted HRNK UN consultative status.

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